

THE MOVIEGOER

Susan Sontag's life in film.

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In late 1995, Susan Sontag, a devoted and often impassioned moviegoer, sorrowfully summed up the state of the art. "A Century of Cinema," an essay written for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and reprinted (in abridged form) in the *Times*, was an outraged lamentation for a hundred-year-old art form that was in "ignominious, irreversible decline." Setting out the reasons for the fall, Sontag mentioned the consumption of TV-size images at home replacing the awed reception of light by "kidnapped" strangers in darkened theatres; the catastrophic rise in movie-production costs in the nineteen-eighties; the tipping of the old balance between art and commerce "decisively in favor of cinema as an industry." All these forces, she wrote, were producing a "disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn't demand anyone's full attention." More than that, moviegoing itself had changed: the blessed state that Sontag called "cinephilia" had faded. Young people no longer arranged their emotional and intellectual lives around an art that was "poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time." They no longer fed their passions in blissfully uncomfortable revival houses with ill-sprung seats and dank odors.

The 1995 article was Sontag's last published piece on movies; in retrospect, it was her farewell to film criticism. Renunciation, along with such reverberant partners as epiphany, retraction, and reaffirmation, was one of her familiar dramatic modes. She brought a certain histrionic (i.e., Parisian) quality into American intellectual life—position-taking as existential drama—and, if you regard her seriously, the portentous turning points of her journey have to be endured. What she renounced, of course, was nothing like regular movie criticism. Sontag wrote only a dozen or so articles about film. Yet all of them were substantial, both as intellectual performance and as a challenge to conventional assumptions about movie form and routine reviewing. Available in her essay collections, the pieces remain events today—a limited, idiosyncratic, rather arrogant contribution to the short list of great American film criticism that includes the writing of James Agee, Robert Warshow, Manny Farber, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris.

In Sontag's case, the movie criticism can be understood only as part of a life-long obsession. In her forty years as a writer, she published fiction and plays; she wrote about literature, theatre, painting, music, and dance; she altered the discourse of illness and debated the aesthetics and morality of photography. She wrote fourteen books in all, and she had, in the last third of her life, an intermittent but much debated public presence as a political moralist and oracle. Yet the preoccupation with movies was there from the beginning, and it went deep. As a young woman, Sontag had done a little acting and worked as a movie extra. When she moved to New York, in 1959, at the age of twenty-six, her apartment was reportedly papered with movie stills. Her essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" which brought her amazingly wide notice when it was published, in 1964, in the small-circulation *Partisan Review*, was filled with references to classic and pop movies as well

as to the other arts. Here was an ambitious literary intellectual who was equally at ease with “artists like Pontormo, Rosso, and Caravaggio” and a minor camp favorite like the green-eyed blonde Virginia Mayo. She did a lot of the homework for “Notes on Camp” at Daniel Talbot’s revival house, the New Yorker, at Eighty-eighth Street and Broadway; copies of “Camp” and other Sontag essays were later distributed free at the theatre. That year, Sontag also sat for one of Andy Warhol’s silent screen tests. Girlishly pretty at the age of thirty-one, she appears rattled by the requirement that she not speak. She’s too self-conscious to engage the movie camera directly (as she engaged the photographer’s lens in the devastating portraits of her that appeared on her book jackets), and she smiles shyly and casts her eyes up and down. It’s an unnerved, coltish encounter. Later, with greater ease, she appeared as the subject of a German documentary, and as an articulate figure in social-issue documentaries (on feminism and on the imprisonment of Cuba’s gay writers and artists). She also turned up, as herself, in Woody Allen’s “Zelig,” commenting in her cathedral tones on Allen’s fictional creation. She worked for film-festival selection committees, and served on festival juries. And, bravely and foolishly, she put her movie love into practice, making four movies of her own. Why did film matter so much to her? What was it that she missed—and so sternly memorialized—in 1995?

In 1948, at the age of fifteen, Sontag, browsing at a newsstand just off Hollywood Boulevard, bought her first copy of *Partisan Review*. A fatherless, bookish girl, stranded amid the driver’s-ed and typing classes of North Hollywood High, she was happy only in the company of a few like-minded students or at home, listening to music or reading Thomas Mann and German philosophy—“sipping at a hundred straws,” she later wrote. *Partisan Review*, which was then at its peak, was more or less the house organ for the New York intellectuals, celebrants of high modernism, which, as they understood it, was marked by something unprecedented: an obsession with the physical means of making art (tone rows, dance movement, densely packed clusters of imagery), and by a formalism so radical that it carried art to the border of metaphysics. As a teen-ager, Sontag absorbed the doctrines and the canons. But by the time she came to write for *Partisan*, in the early sixties, the New York group believed that, with some exceptions—Balanchine’s plotless ballets, the Abstract Expressionist painters—the great, long moment of high modernism was over.

Sontag disagreed. She never mentioned the New York intellectuals (Trilling, Kazin, Rahv, MacDonald, et al.) by name, but her line of attack was clearly directed at them. If they believed that classic modernism was exhausted, they did so, she thought, in a state of ignorance. Most of them, as Gore Vidal pointed out, didn’t read contemporary French novels, and they had turned their backs on Sontag’s beloved Paris. She had spent time there as a graduate student in 1958 and returned again and again—she even lived for a while, in the seventies, in Sartre’s old apartment on the Rue Bonaparte. A beautiful and brainy young American abroad, she was a cross between a Jamesian heroine (“the heiress of all the ages”) and Audrey Hepburn in “Funny Face” (1957). Hepburn’s book-loving American girl goes to the City of Light, is pursued by the bearded, caddish founder of “empathicalism,” and, in the nick of time, gets rescued from the lascivious European embrace by an American photographer (Fred Astaire—a Richard Avedon stand-in), who turns her into a model. Sontag, however, held on to her books; she was saved by Left

Bank journals like *Les Temps Modernes* rather than by Givenchy gowns. She exulted in the intense café life of speculative brilliance and harsh debate, and she brought Paris to bear against the cultural pessimism of the New York group.

First, there were the French Surrealists and the highbrow pornographers and the literary madmen—Jarry, Céline, Genet, Artaud, Bataille, and Michel Leiris, not to mention the then anonymous author of “The Story of O”—all of whom the New York intellectuals had, in her opinion, undervalued. Then there were the theorists and practitioners of “the new novel,” Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, who had given up on “psychology” and three-dimensional characters moving through sequential stories, and instead floated their characters in a coldly objective world of things. And there was something else that most of the New York intellectuals, in their public funeral for modernism, had ignored: the cinema. Dwight Macdonald did write a film-review column for *Esquire* from 1960 to 1966, but most of them, if they went at all, sneaked off for a quickie before dinner. Movies weren’t serious.

Sontag spent her life trying to grasp modernity, both as a specific series of developments in the arts and as the quintessence of experience in the violent and demoralizing twentieth century. Film was the new art of the century, and the greatest contemporary directors, going past mere representation and narrative, reformulated its language, expanding consciousness and emotion in the bargain. In 1968, in a long piece on Godard in *Partisan Review*, Sontag wrote that the director’s “approach to established rules of film technique like the unobtrusive cut, consistency of point of view, and clear story line is comparable to Schoenberg’s repudiation of the tonal language prevailing in music around 1910.”

Film, then, was the last great wave of high modernism. Or at least a certain kind of film, in which form became experimental and philosophically resonant: the movies of Resnais but not Buñuel, Bresson but not Dreyer, Godard but not Truffaut, Bergman’s “Persona” but not Bergman’s “Smiles of a Summer Night.” In such works, film amounted to nothing less than the making of new forms and the making of souls.

The period of Sontag’s first essays—the early sixties, before Pop became omnivorous and Vietnam obsessed everybody—was surely the last earnest moment in American culture. Entertainment conglomerates had not yet begun to control mass culture. Irony was a mode of aggression that separated the knowing from the saps, not a weak-backed accommodation to the undermining proliferation of media images and the levelling of cultural values. D. H. Lawrence and Freud were culture heroes, and sex, jubilantly heralded in its liberated form by Norman O. Brown as “polymorphous perversity,” was an energized revolt against the allegedly deadening conditions of modern life. Sontag wrote for a vanguard audience that, a few years later, and considerably enlarged, fell in love with Woody Allen’s culture-quoting farces and satires; part of the charm of her early work lies in its Gitanes-and-espresso period flavor, the exhalations of an unaffiliated intellectual trying to make sense of big issues and problems. It was a time when people did not think it absurd to demand something like redemption from art.

In 1961, Alain Resnais completed the ineffable “Last Year at Marienbad,” in which handsome men and women in dinner clothes stand around in a vast sculpture-strewn hotel, demurely inquiring whether they met the year before. In a 1963 piece on Resnais, Sontag deplored the movie’s sluggishness and the “insufferable incantatory style” of the narration. Yet she also welcomed the film as a startling formal experiment. What

“Marienbad” meant—its content, as conventionally understood—was not the issue. “What matters in ‘Marienbad,’ ” she wrote a year later, “is the pure untranslatable sensuous immediacy of some of its images, and its rigorous if narrow solution to certain problems of cinematic form.” Resnais had pulled off a modernist hat trick: the static nature of the movie conveyed his notion of the irrecoverability of memory; the means by which the spectacle existed at all was what the movie was about. The same was true of another Sontag favorite, Antonioni’s 1960 “L’Avventura,” in which a “moral” narrative dissolves into a secondary, “amoral” one, a shift that embodies the dissolution of will suffered by the man and woman at the center of the movie; or, rather, their vanquished wills come to exist on the same plane as the rocks on a barren island and the empty de Chirico cityscapes of Sicily, where the film was shot. “L’Avventura” was a triumphant film equivalent of the “new novel.”

Summoning the disruptive and heroic powers of high modernism, Sontag insisted that formal experimentation could “reorganize the audience’s entire sensibility.” Initially cast adrift by such narratives, we had to re-create ourselves in order to find our way home to meaning, to emotion. At first glance, the films of Robert Bresson, with their austerity and purity—their suppression of ordinary feelings and action—seem remote. The critic’s task, Sontag wrote in a 1964 essay, was to “understand the aesthetics—that is, find the beauty—of such coldness.” And to find the pathos in it, too. In Sontag’s recounting, Bresson’s ascetic Catholicism, by paring away the muck and clutter of conventional expressiveness, reveals the thrilling mystery of God’s work—the extension of grace to a few humble and unwary souls. “The detachment and retarding of the emotions, through the consciousness of form,” she wrote, “makes them far stronger and more intense in the end.”

In these early celebrations of formalism, Sontag ignored the commonplace enticements of storytelling, acting, bodies, faces, movement. And she disdained the regular reviewer’s beaverish practice of sorting good logs from bad, the many varieties of critics’ patter and small talk—the jokes and casual anthropologies of popular taste. She was not in the game for fun. She had, it turned out, little interest in the American cinema, apart from its ability to offer up camp icons like Marlene Dietrich and Mae West, and aesthetically hapless but revealing texts like the bomb-haunted science-fiction films of the nineteen-fifties and sixties. When Godard and the other New Wave directors worked as critics, in their early twenties, they took up the American “auteurs”—Hawks, Ford, Nicholas Ray. But Sontag ignored them. Nor did she have anything to say, in the nineteen-seventies, about Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg, and the other young directors of the American Golden Age. The international avant-garde—that’s where the action was, that’s where the nature of the medium itself was at stake. A paradox, then: in the essays collected in “Against Interpretation,” written when she was young, Sontag spoke up for pop, for the Supremes and the Beatles, for outré and disreputable tastes, too, but her film criticism was invariably ambitious and furrow-browed. If a movie or a director’s career was not a major event in the history of art, or at least of cinema, she did not write about it. To her credit, however, she never embraced the delusionary belief that an aesthetic revolution—a new art language—would somehow demystify and dissolve the bourgeois order. The revolution she wanted was personal, internal, singular. “For all my exhortatory tone,” she wrote of the essays in “Against Interpretation,” “I was not trying to lead anyone into the Promised Land except myself.”

In "Against Interpretation," Sontag praised writers who, like the film critic Manny Farber, "reveal the sensuous surface of art," but her own practice was to find the skeleton beneath the skin. What were the philosophical implications of a movie's form? Raptly serious, even solemn, an aphorist without humor, a habitual didact who could wring thunderous meanings from silence, she demanded "the erotics of art" in a metaphor-free prose that was anything but erotic. At times, the moralizing aesthete came close to self-parody: "If we understand morality in the singular, as a generic decision on the part of consciousness, then it appears that our response to art is 'moral' insofar as it is, precisely, the enlivening of our sensibility and consciousness," and so on. Yet she was saved by an uncontrollable element in her temperament—a yearning for emotional experience, even for transcendence. Some of the early manifestos reach for extremes of pleasure or suffering—"excruciation" and "terror" became words of praise. She wanted to be overwhelmed, even humbled. At the movies, she always sat in the third row, right in the center.

As a critic of all the arts, she longed to discover and bring the news; her method was categorization and praise. She was an insistent maker of canons, alternate canons, renegade canons—the specialized tradition of Bosch, Sade, Rimbaud, and Kafka, for example, whose seriousness took the form of "anguish, cruelty, derangement." She may have rejected cultural levels, but she embraced intellectual hierarchies; she wanted to know who mattered in any given art form and where people ranked. The ardency of her desire for genius was both touching in itself and the secret of her popular appeal as a writer. Sontag's hunger made one eager to read more of her writing in the same way that Jeanne Moreau's pouty dissatisfaction made one eager to see what man could possibly please her.

Sontag's movie essays of the late sixties struck a note of exaltation that hadn't been heard in American film writing since the naïve rhapsodies of the First World War period, when D. W. Griffith made "The Birth of a Nation" and poets like Vachel Lindsay sang of the movies. Sontag's writing, however, was anything but naïve. Expounding, qualifying, debating, anticipating objections and retorts, she had become the most methodical of critical revolutionaries. With tempered elation, she laid out a radical program—the destruction of belief in conventional narrative, the devotion of film to selfreflexive "meta-artistic activities." In the future, she was sure, film would take up with ever greater intensity the modernist task of dramatizing its own expressive means. The twin poles of this activity were "the solemn, exquisitely conscious, self-annihilating structures of Bergman's great film 'Persona' " (1966) and Godard's seemingly slapdash methods, which were "much more light-hearted, playful, often witty, sometimes flippant, sometimes just silly."

In her 1968 piece on Godard, she summed up the director's early work (through the 1967 "Weekend") as an unstable compound of fiction, fantasy, lyrical essay, and literary quotation, in which "story" was a relatively trivial and expedient base upon which the most significant activity of the movie could be inscribed as commentary. In Godard's films, the realistic novel and the missing-fourth-wall theatre had been kicked over at last: realism and "content" had been dissolved into vivacious formal play. And among the elements generated by this breaking of forms were subjects and emotions previously unknown in movies:

If film is, in Godard's laconic definition, the "analysis" of something "with images

and sounds,” there can be no impropriety in making literature a subject for cinematic analysis. Alien to movies as this kind of material may seem, at least in such profusion, Godard would no doubt argue that books and other vehicles of cultural consciousness are part of the world; therefore they belong in films. Indeed, by putting on the same plane the fact that people read and think and go seriously to the movies and the fact that they cry and run and make love, Godard has disclosed a new vein of lyricism and pathos for cinema: in bookishness, in genuine cultural passion, in intellectual callowness, in the misery of someone strangling in his own thoughts.

In order to “read” Godard’s films, the audience needed to participate in disruption and artifice as a daredevil adventure. But Bergman’s breaking of forms in “Persona” was something else—assaultive, alarming, even apocalyptic. The movie is about two women—a mute actress (Liv Ullmann) and a voluble nurse (Bibi Andersson)—who probe each other’s limits while living together on a lonely island. The narrative stalls, and Bergman appears to be not just dramatizing the means of cinema but annulling them. We see a projector turned on at the beginning of the film, and, in the middle, there is a kind of caesura—the image of Andersson’s face “catching” and burning, as if stuck in the projector’s gate. It is a disturbing modernist epiphany. When Bergman returns to the narrative, the consciousness of the Andersson character, as Sontag says, has been drastically altered. So formal exploration stretched to its limits may lead not just to a dramatization of the means of making art but to the dissolution of such means, and the dissolution of consciousness, too. “The deep unflinching knowledge of anything will in the end prove destructive,” Sontag says, summing up Bergman’s idea. Pushing formalism into her favorite early mode—anguish—Sontag had, it turned out, taken film aesthetics as far into modernism as she could.

And then came the descent from inviolate analysis to the humiliating trials of craft. In the wake of Sontag’s enthusiasm for “Persona,” the Swedish film company Sandrews offered her a chance to make movies with Swedish technicians and actors. She quickly took up what she may have interpreted as a dare, but the two features that she made—“Duet for Cannibals” (1969) and “Brother Carl” (1971)—did not turn out well. In fact, they turned out terribly. (They can be seen at the Walter Reade on September 22nd.) In these stifling chamber dramas, small groups of characters prey on each other sexually, moving about like zombies in the dead air of a Stockholm apartment or on a semi-deserted island. Into the portentous void, lines of “sophisticated” dialogue (“I’m much less cruel than I used to be”) awkwardly intrude. The themes are power, domination, the arbitrariness of sexual will; Sontag said that she wanted to create “anxiety,” but, for the viewer, the anxiety is created mainly by her lack of skill. Lars Ekborg, who plays an arrogant revolutionary in “Duet for Cannibals,” comes off as merely snide. Laurent Terzieff, as a dancer who has retreated into silence in “Brother Carl”—renouncing his art like one of the exemplary modernist ascetics (Rimbaud, Artaud) whom Sontag had celebrated in the essay “The Aesthetics of Silence”—has a big, goofy smile and long, floppy limbs. Grinning haplessly as he emerges from the woods, he seems less an artist in voluntary withdrawal than a crazed escapee from a grade-C horror movie. Sontag’s lack of humor had caught up with her. (In “Unguided Tour,” a film she made in 1982, a murmurous narration dawdles over pretty pictures of Venice as her friend the dancer Lucinda Childs,

sometimes accompanied by a gentleman, impassively walks around the city.) Sontag had run afoul of a banal but inescapable problem. A critic-aesthete may campaign for the dissolution of realism in narrative, but there's no getting away from the glory and curse of the movies: cinema is a photographic medium in which people appear to be moving through real space in real time. That, of course, is an illusion, but the medium, apart from the genre of poetic experimental films, poses an immediate demand for authoritative representation that no other art is burdened by. The camera remorselessly revealed Sontag's inadequacy to represent anything at all. Watching "Duet for Cannibals," with its clumsy sexual fantasias and its possible dream sequences, one understands that to be a good fantasist one first has to be a good realist. In retrospect, however, Sontag appears to have found a possible cinematic vocation in a film she made between "Brother Carl" and "Unguided Tour." In October of 1973, at the end of the Yom Kippur War, she led a camera crew to Israel. In the early sections of "Promised Lands," the documentary that resulted from this adventure, there are some very still shots—of perforated, burned-out tanks in the desert, of blackened, fly-specked corpses and cracked shoes—that attain an authority and a power as art that go way beyond anything else Sontag did in the movies. Given her penchant for moral drama, documenting war and historical catastrophe might have been the right path for her. Years later, in her last book, "Regarding the Pain of Others" (2003), she acknowledged the dangers of voyeurism and moral self-aggrandizement, yet she still affirmed the absolute value of journalists' and artists' bearing witness to atrocity. Between 1993 and 1996, she made several trips to the embattled, sniper-ridden city of Sarajevo, and staged a production of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" there, in the candle-lit Pozoriste Mladih Theatre. Moviegoers may regret that she didn't make a documentary of the besieged city that she came to love.

Sontag liked to describe herself, paradoxically, as "a besotted aesthete" and an "obsessive moralist," and if the two selves were constantly at play, and sometimes at war, the moralist, though never quite effacing the aesthete, came to the fore in her later years. In 1965, she had nervously praised Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" and "Olympiad" as works that "transcend the categories of propaganda or even reportage." She went on, "We find ourselves—to be sure, rather uncomfortably—seeing 'Hitler' and not Hitler, the '1936 Olympics' and not the 1936 Olympics. Through Riefenstahl's genius as a filmmaker, the 'content' has—let us even assume, against her intentions—come to play a purely formal role." But a decade later, in the startlingly combative essay "Fascinating Fascism," originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, Sontag referred to "Triumph" as a film "whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker's having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda." By the time she wrote "Fascinating Fascism" (and the essays included in her 1977 study "On Photography"), the youthful call for an "erotics of art" had been replaced by a demand for an ethics of art.

Sontag's shift to ethical advocacy produced such controversial public occasions as the 1982 Town Hall speech, in which she said farewell, once and for all, to any further sentimental illusions about Communism in power, even in such Third World countries as Cuba and North Vietnam, which she had earlier praised. She also served as the president of American PEN from 1987 to 1989, and in that role became an early supporter of

Salman Rushdie, after the fatwa was issued against him. She did not take well to the intimidation of writers and could be snappish, even haughty, when challenged herself. This shift in the tonalities of her writing was accompanied by a shift in geographical attention. Roland Barthes, Sontag's favorite contemporary author, died in 1980, and her role as an importer of literature and ideas from Paris abruptly came to an end. Her ambassadorial activity moved from Paris to Germany and Central Europe, from French brilliance and perversity to Middle-European soulfulness. She wrote essays on the German-language writers Robert Walser, Walter Benjamin, Elias Canetti, and W. G. Sebald. She wrote lovingly about the music of Wagner, in a piece that revealed an unsuspected appreciation of lyricism in art, and, in her last three major film articles, she took on Wagnerian works: the Riefenstahl propaganda epics; then, in 1979, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's "Hitler: A Film from Germany," a seven-hour Surrealist meditation on Hitler's place in German history and mythology; and, in 1983, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Berlin Alexanderplatz," a fifteen-hour movie made, in hour-long sections, for German television. These two films were summings-up—"posthumous" films, as she called Syberberg's end-of-culture monstrosity. In that same piece, she quoted Walter Benjamin's remark that "all great works of literature found a genre or dissolve one." Godard, Bergman, Syberberg, and Fassbinder, it turned out, had reached a series of stunning dead ends, dissolving not only genres but criticism, too. Sontag had run out of aesthetic revolutions. And the culture that supported revolutionary work had changed. "Stripped of its heroic stature, of its claims as an adversary sensibility," she wrote in 1979, "modernism has proved acutely compatible with the ethos of an advanced consumer society." She was talking, of course, about what soon came to be known as postmodernism. "Art is now the name of a huge variety of satisfactions—of the unlimited proliferation, and devaluation, of satisfaction itself." Her hopes had fallen victim to the dismaying larger trend in which every radical development in modernism degenerated into routine: by the eighties, avant-garde techniques from the films of the sixties were showing up in commercials and music videos. Art had not only become commodified, as the Marxists like to say; it decorated corporate culture. The breaking of forms had led not to an agonized "reorganization of sensibility" but to an amiable shrugging off of seriousness in art and the levelling of all cultural activity. Like her long-ago mentors among the New York intellectuals, she had come to the end of the redemptive capacities of the avant-garde. When the breaking of forms no longer enlarged the soul, she gave up writing about movies—that was the disappointment behind the 1995 farewell to criticism. But this chastened "late" mood should not be seen as a defeat. In her fiction, she had abandoned the dry experimentalism of her early works, "The Benefactor" (1963) and "Death Kit" (1967), and had written something much richer, "The Volcano Lover" (1992), a maddeningly attenuated but very juicy meditation on collecting, obsession, manners, violence, and sex. Much has been made of the alleged irony of this clarion avant-gardist shifting to quasi-realistic historical fiction in "Volcano" and in her last novel, "In America" (2000), but perhaps the shift was presaged by the tone of her early essays. In that yearning for transcendence, in the praise of sensuousness (a quality that she achieved at last in "Volcano"), in the desire that formalism offer a heady charge of emotion, an ardent, even deeply romantic temperament can be seen longing for an art that engulfs and devastates. This fiercely proud, even vain, woman was not afraid to acknowledge certain kinds of vulnerability and even error. Some of the early positions

needed to be retracted. She hadn't, as she admitted to Joan Acocella in this magazine in 2000, actually enjoyed the experimental fiction by William Burroughs and Nathalie Sarraute that she had praised thirty years earlier, and "formalism" had very little to do with the things that she did enjoy—say, the dancer Joseph Duell's putting his hand before his face in Balanchine's "La Valse" in such a way that it stabbed her "through the heart." Sontag's ambitious work in film criticism holds out heroic, if not always achievable or likable, goals for movies. For regular movie critics, it has served less as a model than as a set of ideas to react against. Yet it takes on difficult art with clarity and rhetorical fervor; it situates film art within all the arts; and it attempts to drive a shaft through American parochialism and self-satisfaction. And Sontag continued to flourish as a movie-lover. Toward the end of her life, what she admired in movies was less a revolution in form than an affecting radical humanism—"inwardness" and "a cinema of personal dilemmas which are never resolved." After the 1995 piece came out, a few critics complained that she was merely memorializing the passions of her youth and failing to keep up with new developments. But, in talks and in interviews, she praised the humanist Russian director Alexander Sokurov, the Iranian Abbas Kiarostami, and the Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang. The hunger was still there, just in altered form. Sontag began her career as an intellectual celebrity by celebrating the mixture of high and low connoisseurship, but she reached the summit of her abilities as a writer with a portrait of an unabashed highbrow, eighteenth-century style, the collector Sir William Hamilton, whose love for antiquities and beautiful things, however precious, class-bound, and self-regarding, is the emotional and intellectual center of "The Volcano Lover."

Connoisseurship of Hamilton's type is an inherently conservative act, tending toward the reaffirmation of highly defined pleasures. Sontag, it turned out, had a personal canon of about four hundred movies that she visited over and over at revival houses—Renoir's "Rules of the Game" and Kurosawa's "High and Low" were particular favorites, and she claimed to have seen Ozu's heartbreaking "Tokyo Story" thirty times. "There are passions which last forever," she told an audience of movie-lovers at the Japan Society in 2003. At the end of her life, working hard, and often ill, Susan Sontag went to the movies almost every day of the week.